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## Big Brother program gives lift to boy's life

by *Amelia Robinson, Dayton Daily News*

DAYTON, Ohio — Andre Rogers' smile had dimmed. After losing his mother and baby brother in a double shooting in the summer, the 11-year-old was in distress. His paternal grandmother was concerned.

"He seemed so lonely," Mary Harris recalled. "He was just so withdrawn. I said 'I am going to get someone for you.'"

The 55-year-old Dayton resident contacted United Way five months ago in an attempt to find help for the child who, by default, has become her "little boy."

Harris' 32-year-old son - Andre's father - died of complications eight days after being shot in a bar in 1999. His assailant was sentenced to 24 years to life in prison for the murder and two other felonies.

Four years later, Andre was orphaned. His 28-year-old mother and 2-year-old step-brother died of gunshot wounds June 29. The mother's family has disputed the coroner's homicide and suicide rulings.

Although close to his mother's family, he has lived with Harris and her husband since his mother's death.

"It's not easy, but he's my hope," said Harris, a 20-year employee of a Brookville manufacturer. "He's what I hold on to."

United Way put Harris in contact with the Big Brother/Big Sister of the Greater Miami Valley, a nonprofit agency that matches young people from Montgomery, Greene, Miami and Preble counties with screened adult mentors with similar interest.

Days later, Wesley T. McCaskill, an Air Force officer, entered Andre's life as a "big brother".

When he signed on to the program, McCaskill said he never thought he'd be paired with a child with such a traumatic past. But he said he prayed about the decision and meeting Andre gave him his answer.

"It was like an instant click," he said. "We have fun. Being able to connect with a kid makes me happy."

McCaskill, a first lieutenant based at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, acknowledged his job could mean he'll be relocated. Even if that happens, McCaskill said he plans to maintain the relationship he started with Andre. "He's gotten very attached to me. I've gotten so attached to him as well."

Pegge Bellamy, corporate development specialist for Big Brothers/Big Sisters Miami Valley, said the average relationship between matches lasts 14 months, but many relationships last decades.

"Once you have a relationship with a child, you're not (going to easily) give that up," she said.

McCaskill - a father of two children who live out-of-state - and Andre hang out a few times a week. They go to the weight room, drive around town, talk and play video games. McCaskill said he doesn't make their relationship about Andre's losses. The faces of those family members adorn the walls of Andre's room in his grandmother's house.

"I see the photos (of his mother), but he doesn't want to talk about his mother," McCaskill said.

Although he has his own family, Andre said the relationship with McCaskill is special.

Bellamy said few of children in the program have faced losses such as Andre's but all need companionship. "The parent sees that the child can really benefit from having another adult in his life," she said. "It's amazing how much you can absolutely change a child's life by giving them one on one attention."

Harris said Andre is still dealing with the deaths, but with the help of McCaskill and others he is coming out of his shell and is smiling more.

Andre recently helped pin the rank on McCaskill during a ceremony promoting him from second lieutenant. He placed some of McCaskill's old medals on his baseball cap.

"Wesley's the best thing to happen to me and my grandson," Harris said. "Andre's more open now. His whole attitude has changed so much. He's so much better."